The Man at Solitaria

By Geik Turner

SOLITARIA will be found indicated on the map by a circle half as large as that which represents Chicago. That is Solitaria as it is advertised. In reality it consists of a side-track and watering tank on the Great Western Railroad, and a little wooden box opposite, courteously called a station, which is inhabited by a man whose aim in life is to watch the side-track and telegraph along the line how it is occupied at various hours of the day and night.

Just to the east the Great Western makes its only distinct curve for miles through a little piece of woods. To the west it stretches straight across the face of Indiana, mottled with a million half-burned stumps, and cut into big squares by incalculable miles of rail fence.

The man at Solitaria got to thinking it over—he had a great deal of time to do this—and he made up his mind that matters were going all wrong. In the first place, he thought he ought to be allowed more than twenty-five dollars a month for his services, and that, considering he had been running Solitaria alone for fifteen years, they ought to give him an assistant to talk to—to talk to and to allow him an occasional chance to sleep.

These were, of course, entirely personal matters. But finally he made up his mind the whole thing was run wrong. It stood to reason; they never gave it any rest. Day after day and night after night they had sent freight trains and express trains, and express trains and freight trains chasing each other along the road till they had got it so it was all going to break down pretty soon—the road, and the cars, and the men, and he himself—especially he himself; he saw that plainly. They were all going to stop short, one of these days, and fly to pieces.

Now, take himself, for instance: Was it right that they should have kept running their trains by his door twenty-four hours out of the day, and 365 days a year, for fifteen years, disturbing him and depriving him of what little sleep belonged to him? Yet all night long they persisted in sending their freights jarring and clanking by and their express trains shrieking and making up time along the level grade.

He got so he knew those whistles by name—he could hear them shriek for miles and miles in either direction—coming nearer and nearer, till the train rushed by in a cloud of yellow light. Then the next one came. It was bad enough at that, but when they got to calling him names it was more than he could bear.

Besides, there was the electricity those trains kept making and storing up in his station, faster than he could ever hope to get rid of it. It was taking his life away. He went out and watched the wheels of the freight trains crunching, and grinding, and squealing by, and he could see it just rolling off and running into the station. Then nights it came stealing over him, and numbing him, just as soon as he tried to get a little sleep, which, heaven knew, he was entitled to.

Anybody knows that trains running by like that, day and night, store up more electricity in a station than a man can bear, especially if he is all alone. But they paid no attention to that. He often thought he would write to the division superintendent, who had been a telegraph operator himself, and ought to think of such things, and tell him to stop it. But this plan he never carried out; he had asked for things before.

Now, whatever might be said, no one could accuse the Man at Solitaria of not giving the matter sufficient thought. For months during the Summer he sat out on the platform of his box, in the baking sun daytimes, and through the close, airless Indiana nights, looking down the tracks between train times, and considering the question.

He saw clearly they did not recognize the power and importance of the man they were wronging. He knew perfectly well, for instance, that any time he chose he could turn the switch to the side-track and stand an express train on its head in the ditch. That would be fascinating, certainly. Indeed, he considered the proposal seriously for a number of weeks, and figured carefully on what train he would better take; but finally thought better of this plan, too. It would only stop one train, which wasn't what he wanted at all. The Man at Solitaria felt the responsibility of his position; he decided to run the whole railroad himself.

Of course, he recognized that there would be opposition to this scheme on the part of the president and directors of the road, and the division superintendent—especially the superintendent—the Man knew the division superintendent. But that railroad must be run right. As a first step in that direction the Man saved up money and laid in a large supply of canned meats; he also secured two forty-four calibre revolvers and half a dozen boxes of cartridges.

Of course, the management of the Great Western Railroad didn't know what was going on in the mind of the Man—especially as he carried on most of his communication with human beings by telegraph. It didn't care much, either, as long as he kept awake eighteen hours a day and watched the side-track and told them how it was occupied. Consequently, no one knew of his intention of operating the road, and no one knew or probably ever will know why he chose such an unpleasant day for starting it.

It wasn't unpleasant in the sense that it was rainy—it was merely hot. Along down the track the heat rose in great zigzags, where the yellow sun beat down and baked a crust over the surface of Indiana. There was not a breeze in the air, not a sound except the occasional call of a quail from some distant rail fence, or the cry of a seventeen-year locust in a dead tree. On the sunny side of the station at Solitaria the thermometer took its stand at 118 degrees and refused to be moved, and the air was a semi-solid mass of cinders.

"The man opened a window in front of the station, with a revolver in his hand, and told them that what he was trying to do was none of their business."

The Man at Solitaria made up his mind he would shut down his railroad at six o'clock. He laid in a good supply of water and loaded up his revolvers; then he shut up the station and made a kind of barricade of old ties around his telegraph instrument and sat down inside and waited.

No. 64, the fast freight from the West, was due at 6:10 o'clock to draw up on the siding. No. 24, the fast express from the East, was due at 6:17. At 6:03 the Man telegraphed the station east that the freight was on the side-track and the main line was clear. The freight was not yet in sight. At 6:13 it reached the station, hurrying to make up lost time, and ran off the track; some one had turned the switch the freight cars just before she came to a stop, smashing a cylinder and nearly jerking the heads off the passengers.

All the windows and doors of the coaches flew open with a slam, and the train hands and passengers began to swarm out like hornets out of a hornets' nest. The trainmen started forward on the run to see what was the matter and to look up the operator and find out what he was trying to do.

The Man opened a window in front of the station, with a revolver in his hand, and told them that what he was trying to do was none of their business. He was operating this damned road now, and he wanted them to understand it. Besides, he didn't want them on his platform. By way of emphasis, he fired a couple of shots as close to their feet as he could without hitting them.

They got off, and he shut down the window with a bang. Somebody went around and tried a window in the rear, and he fired two shots through the glass. It was just as well they didn't try it again for

By this time the station at Solitaria presented an unwonted and active scene. Three trains were huddled up around the place, two of them tangled together in a head. The engine of No. 64 stood up inquiringly on the station platform, like a big dog waiting to be let in. The trainmen and the passengers still stood around and discussed ways and means and swore at the Man and the infernal heat.

Several times they had tried to approach the Man, but the Man at Solitaria was unapproachable. A big passenger from the West had declared he would go up, anyway, as a little thing like that had a comparatively mild effect on his nerves, and a small passenger from the East had tried the effect of kind words and moral suasion; but the big six-shooters of the Man had an equally discouraging effect on both.

In fact, the exhilaration of running a railroad was beginning to exercise a strange fascination on the Man at Solitaria. This was only natural, after all. The way he ran things was a good deal like firing railroad trains at a mark, with the certainty of hitting it, if nobody interfered. He recognized, however, that there was need of great discretion and intelligence in the matter. The train despatcher was already making the telegraph instrument chatter like a sewing-machine, asking the station to the west what had become of the express, which, of course, the station west didn't know.

The Man sent word down the line that a brakeman had come into the station and said there was a big wreck at a culvert three miles west. It was a bad wreck, with a great many killed, and the wrecking train should be sent at once. The train could run right by his station to the place, as the line was clear.

In fifteen minutes the wrecking train was drawing out of the Centerville station, seventeen miles east, with all the doctors that could be raised in the vicinity, and coming down the line sixty miles an hour in a halo of hot cinders. If it hadn't been for a line of brakemen stationed up above the curve there would have been a great opening for young doctors in Centerville. As it was the train stopped so short on the curve that the front trucks of the engine ran off and the one passenger coach was jolted full of a mixture of frightened doctors and medicine vials.

By this time the Man had been operating the road for an hour and a half, and the excitement of the thing was growing intense, especially among the disgruntled officials he had superseded. Trains were beginning to stack up at the stations east and west, waiting for developments, and the train despatcher was beating such a devil's tattoo on his instrument, trying to find out what was going on, anyhow, that the Man used up a great deal of patience and ingenuity trying to soothe him.

As for the division superintendent, who had come on the wrecking train, his hair was rapidly growing white. But, as long as he could not effect a compromise with the Man there was nothing he could do. The Man was engaged at present furnishing information on Solitaria to the outside world, and it was futile to try to conceive what his rich imagination would prompt him to do next.

On the other hand, the freight engine on one side and the engine of the wrecker on the other cooped up the only able engine on the track, and made advance or retreat impossible as long as the wrecker couldn't turn to and haul itself up on the track. But the Man refused to compromise. The division superintendent finally gave it up and started overland for the next telegraph station, ten miles away.

In the meanwhile matters were coming to a desperate crisis in the parade before the station at Solitaria. It was growing dark. Under the circumstances there was cause for excitement, although there was a line of brakemen, armed with lanterns, stretched out half a mile either way.

It was generally agreed that the lamps in the cars should be left unlighted in deference to the opinion of the women, who thought lights would afford too good a mark, supposing the Man should decide to turn his attention to a little target practise. The engineers and express messengers lit theirs, however, and the headlights on the two middle engines were started and threw a yellow glare on the cars before them. The Man paid no attention to matters of this kind, so long as he saw they did not interfere with his plans for operating his road.

About this time a couple of brakemen put their heads together and, getting in back of the tender of the express engine, began to fire chunks of coal through the window at the Man when he was telegraphing. They figured that it would make the Man mad and that he might exhaust his ammunition upon the tender. It did set him going for a while, and, the sound of smashing glass, the crack of the revolver, and the spat of the bullets up against the tender roused considerable interest, especially among the women. Then the Man made up his mind not to shoot any more; they couldn't do him much harm, anyway, from behind the tender, and he decided to devote no more of his official time to them. So they knew no more about his supply of ammunition than before. Besides, the thing was beginning to be too much for the women in the cars, who got an idea from the noise that something was going on or was about to, and the conductors called the brakemen off. They were afraid they might get the Man too much excited.

As it got darker, however, the ideas of the men on the outside began to crystalize. About everything possible had been tried and failed. At 8:30 o'clock a determined minority decided to go gunning for the Man. It seemed a rather inhuman thing to do, but there was no knowing what was going to turn up. It was really a case of self-defense. Accordingly a messenger was sent across the fields to a farmhouse for a shotgun.

At this time a ridiculous thing happened. The Man went to sleep. This seems incredible until it is remembered that he had been up very late the night before arranging the schedule for his road. As for the men on the outside, they thought at first he was merely leaning forward over his instrument; then some one suggested that he might be asleep, but the crowd was against him, the popular theory being that he was probably playing some trick.

The beams of one of the headlights streamed in the front window of the station and showed him very plainly. He made an interesting, if not entirely charming picture in the yellow light—especially his white face and his straggly black hair. If he had made the slightest move the crowd would have seen it; but he didn't. So after he had lain perfectly still for ten minutes many said that they were comfortably sure that he was really asleep.

A young physician who watched him a while said they couldn't wake him with a club—it was one of the peculiar symptoms of what ailed him—and suggested that now was the golden opportunity for those whose business it was, to gather him in without the slightest danger to themselves. There was a long and unanimous silence, during which the theory of subterfuge on the part of the Man gained ground. Finally the doctor said he would be one of two men to go in after him; a freight brakeman said he would be the other.

They went to the rear of the station and opened a catch in a window where a piece of coal had broken out a light, raised the sash and crawled in. The crowd kept watch of the Man, prepared to see him stirred. But he didn't stir. The [illegible] crawled up behind the barricade and in front where the headlight [illegible] and jumped. Then the [illegible] through the front windows, [illegible] was gathered in.

Now this is the plain and [illegible] tale of how the Man at Solitaria [illegible] Great Western Road. There [illegible] bility that he will resume [illegible] Nevertheless he inaugurated [illegible] ment for which the [illegible] should be grateful. The [illegible] taria [illegible] an assistant.